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Saudi curb on alms targets radicals' cash Gifts to charity have funded militant groups in other countries

KATHY EVANS

SAUDI ARABIA'S interior ministry has moved to control the collection of donations for charities, one of the principal sources of funds for radical Islamic groups in the Arab world and Asia.

With their enormous wealth, Saudi private citizens and businessmen have long been a target of appeals from a motley collection of humanitarian causes and political movements in the Muslim world. Giving alms to the poor is a requirement of Islam.

Last week, under growing criticism from Arab regimes facing powerful Islamic movements, Saudi Arabia announced that in future all donations must pass through a fund headed by a member of the royal family, Prince Salman, the governor of Riyadh.

The decision to curb the flow of money came just days after a visit to Riyadh by the Egyptian defence minister, General Mohammed Tantawi. "The new ruling is just because [Hosni] Mubarak is in a panic," one exiled Arab radical said, referring to the Egyptian president.

In the past, the Muslim Brotherhood movement, banned in Egypt, received large sums from sympathisers in the kingdom, as did a number of other north African Islamic movements, and the Palestinian group, Hamas.

Already one foundation, Jamaat al **Birr**, or the Good Works Organisation, has been closed. Its head, Adel Batarji, a known political activist, has been detained by the police.

The little-noticed announcement on Saudi radio of the new ruling said the restriction would also apply to donations given outside the country by Saudi citizens.

Much of this private money was donated in mosques, where any individual was allowed to get up and make an appeal to the congregation. Many of these appeals were made by conmen who simply pocketed the money for themselves, and the new move is partially designed to curb their activities.

But hundreds of millions of dollars annually went to radical groups in Egypt, Sudan and Afghanistan, say Western diplomats and anti-terrorist experts. Officials of London-based Arab radical movements confirm these suspicions.

"Huge amounts came from Saudi Arabia," one exiled radical said. "Every Muslim who is devoted has no option but to support Islamic causes."

The flow of donations has continued in the face of policy changes by the Saudi government. In Afghanistan, for example, Saudi private money goes to radical groups in large sums although the government's aid to the mujahedin was cut off two years ago.

Liberal Saudis say that in many cases radicals hijacked legitimate Muslim charities and diverted funds to their favourite causes. Other donations went directly to Arab political movements from their Saudi sponsors.

Islamic radicals said the new ruling would not end the flow of money. One militant said: "Religious Saudis simply will not trust the royal family to handle the money. And those who want to contribute to Islamic movements in the Middle East will continue to do so outside. The sympathy is there; they won't hesitate to send money."